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Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In the present report, the contribution of social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are examined. The report underlines the potential of coordinated action throughout the three areas for realizing the rights of women and girls across the life course by freeing up their time, supporting their mobility, enhancing their access to economic opportunities and strengthening their resilience to shocks. While important progress in access in these areas in recent decades is noted, persistent gaps and gender biases are highlighted, and suggestions are given on how these may be rectified. The situation of groups of women and girls who, due to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, are particularly affected by exclusion and marginalization is also highlighted. The report contains calls for greater participation and accountability and requisite levels of financing to ensure that no one is left behind. The report concludes with recommendations for consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women.

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I. Introduction

1. In accordance with its multi-year programme of work (2017–2019), the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2019 will consider social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as its priority theme. The present report anchors the theme in women's economic and social rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international agreements. This includes their right to work and rights at work, their right to social security and an adequate standard of living, health, education, safe drinking water and sanitation. The realization of these and other rights depends crucially on the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of related services and infrastructure, as well as on the universality of coverage and adequacy of social protection.

2. Social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure are integral to achieving the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Heeding the spirit of the 2030 Agenda's cross-cutting commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, their provision must also be geared towards transforming unequal power relations between women and men. The commitment to leaving no one behind, in turn, requires that the needs and rights of women and girls facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination be addressed as a matter of priority.

3. In target 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, there is an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work. Throughout the world, this work is disproportionately carried out by women and girls. It sustains families, societies and economies, but remains poorly supported. As a result, women and girls face constraints in the realization of their rights to education, employment, participation, leisure and rest. Investment in the three areas are critical to free up their time and support their mobility and access to economic opportunities. Greater policy coherence in the three areas can produce powerful synergies, making individual policies work better and addressing the rights and needs of women and girls in a holistic way.

4. In line with existing international commitments, policies must safeguard women's and girls' access to social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, while ensuring that their design and delivery is transformed to prevent discrimination and to support the empowerment of women and girls. Close attention must be paid to the gender-differentiated risks that women and girls are exposed to over their life course and to the ways in which gender intersects with other inequalities, including those based on age, income, geographic location, race, ethnicity, health or migration status, disability and sexual orientation and gender identity, among others. Investment in the three areas must also be made with a view to promoting equal access to decent work for women. Public services and sustainable infrastructure provide important opportunities not only for job creation, but also for tackling occupational segregation and gender pay gaps. Women workers are concentrated in front-line health, education and care services, for example, while men continue to dominate in water, energy and transport sectors, as well as at leadership and decision-making levels.

5. The present report draws on the findings of the Expert Group Meeting on the priority theme, convened by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), held in New York from 13 to 15 September 2018. The report also relies on recent research and data from United Nations entities and other sources.

II. World of risks and uncertainties

6. Social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure are critical to mitigate risks and create resilience in the face of economic, social, environmental and demographic changes. While global poverty rates have declined, progress has been uneven throughout regions. In 2015, 736 million people continued to live in extreme poverty, and there is evidence that the pace of poverty reduction is beginning to decelerate.[1] The global economy remains volatile after nearly a decade of crisis, recession and subsequent austerity measures. Prevailing economic policies continue to deepen inequality and push people further behind. Climate change and environmental degradation are undermining the livelihoods of millions of women and men, in particular in the developing world. In some contexts, exclusionary and fear-based politics are gaining ground, breeding conflict and instability. Millions are being forcibly displaced owing to violent conflict and humanitarian catastrophes. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of international migrants increased by 41 per cent, to reach 244 million. Almost half are women and girls (see A/70/59) who often lose access to essential services when they move and tend to be clustered into low-wage sectors with minimal or no social protection coverage.

7. Far-reaching changes in the world of work have created new challenges and, in some cases, exacerbated risks, as discussed by the Commission in 2018 (see E/CN.6/2017/3 and E/2018/27). In many contexts, collective bargaining and labour market regulations have been eroded, and growth in real wages has been sluggish and lagged behind increases in labour productivity.[2] Technological shifts, including automation and digitalization, have enabled new forms of work. There are concerns, however, that technological advances will deepen inequalities in and among countries as low-skill jobs are automated, while new jobs remain inaccessible to those at the bottom of the employment pyramid.

8. While affecting all workers, women are particularly exposed to the negative impact of these trends, facing further pressure on their already lower wages. Currently, 740 million women make their living in the informal economy. In low-income countries, 92 per cent of women are employed informally, compared with 87.5 per cent of men.[3] In the informal economy, women often occupy the least secure and lowest-paying jobs, for example, as domestic workers or contributing family workers who are employed without direct pay in family businesses or farms. Informal workers have, by definition, no or very limited access to social protection. Their access to public services and basic infrastructure is also often limited, hindering their productivity and earning capacity.

9. Demographic and household structures are also undergoing major changes. Developing countries with increasingly youthful populations are not always able to take full advantage of the potential demographic dividend because large shares of young people cannot find jobs and earn an adequate income, with young women

[1] World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle* (Washington, D.C., 2018).

[2] International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Wage Report 2018/2019: What Lies behind Gender Pay Gaps* (Geneva, 2018).

[3] ILO, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, 3rd ed. (Geneva, 2018).

particularly affected by unemployment (see E/CN.6/2017/3). At the same time, population ageing is advancing rapidly, including in developing countries. Globally, the proportion of persons aged 60 or older is projected to increase from 8.2 per cent in 1970 to 13.5 per cent in 2020 and to 16.4 per cent in 2030.[4] Women outnumber men at older ages, and older women are more likely to be providers of unpaid care for ageing spouses and partners, friends and grandchildren, while facing greater income and livelihood insecurity.[5]

III. Social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure

10. Social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure are closely linked. Cash transfers are an increasingly prevalent component of social protection systems, for example, but they are also often used to enhance access to public services. Education is widely considered to be a public service, but it cannot function without adequate physical infrastructure, including school buildings with safe sanitation facilities for girls. Electricity, water and sanitation systems are infrastructure-heavy sectors, but they also operate as public services and often require social protection measures, such as connection fee waivers or subsidies, to be affordable for all. Institutionalized coordination across sectors and levels of government, as well as with private for-profit and not-for-profit providers, is therefore crucial to ensure that social protection, public services and infrastructure policies complement one other in their objectives, functions and financing. An integrated and systemic approach is particularly important from a gender perspective.[6] Without affordable childcare services, for example, women often struggle to remain in the labour market and secure social protection entitlements through employment. New information and communications technologies have the potential to improve the efficiency, accountability and transparency of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure if information regulations, data security and accessibility concerns are carefully addressed.

11. For the purpose of this report, social protection and social security are used interchangeably to refer to policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion.[7] Social protection or social security systems usually comprise a number of schemes that provide comprehensive protection across the life course, including child and family benefits, maternity protection, unemployment support, employment injury benefits, sickness benefits, old-age benefits, disability benefits and survivors' benefits, as well as access to affordable medical care. From a gender perspective, social protection is most effective when it works in tandem with public services, infrastructure and labour market policies.[8]

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[4] United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017* Revision (New York, 2017).

[5] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Long-term care for older people. a new global gender priority", Policy Brief No. 9 (New York, 2017).

[6] Deepta Chopra, "Initiating women's empowerment: achieving gender equality: interlinkages amongst social protection, infrastructure and public services", background paper for the UN-Women expert group meeting, New York, 2018.

[7] ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017–2019: Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2017); *Promoting Inclusion through Social Protection: Report on the World Social Situation 2018* (United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.17.IV.2).

[8] UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (New York, 2015).

12. Public services enable the realization of a vital public interest, such as health, education, public safety, justice or an adequate standard of living for all.[9] The range of services that support the achievement of these goals is broad, including social services such as health, education, housing and care for children and older persons, as well as active labour market policies and agricultural extension services, a well-trained police force and a fair and functioning justice system. When public services are delivered through private providers, it remains the duty of the State to ensure their availability, accessibility, acceptability and adequate quality. Public services play a central role in reducing poverty and inequality[10] and in advancing the rights of women and girls. Access to quality education, for example, is associated with a range of positive outcomes for girls, including lower rates of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

13. Sustainable infrastructure is a broad category of goods and services that promotes sustainable development in economic, social and environmental terms. Great potential exists to transform the energy, transport, water, sanitation and waste management sectors to reduce emissions, enable cleaner production and consumption processes and preserve scarce natural resources, while also promoting gender equality. Viable rural road networks and safe urban transport systems, for example, can enhance the mobility of women and girls, enabling their access to markets, education, training and other public services. Access to clean energy promises to improve the health of women and girls, who currently account for 6 of 10 premature deaths through household air pollution caused by unclean fuels and inefficient technologies, while generating time savings and productivity gains for those who spend a disproportionate amount of time collecting fuel.[11]

IV. Progress alongside persistent gaps and financing challenges

14. There has been significant progress in terms of access to social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure. Significant gender gaps remain, however, and, in some contexts, progress is threatened by budget cuts and austerity measures.[12] Women and girls who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are particularly affected. Throughout countries, those from poor households, rural areas and specific ethnic groups experience clustered deprivations, from lower access to education, health care and decent housing to clean energy, water and sanitation.[12] Young women with those with disabilities have a much higher likelihood of being excluded from education and employment than both young men with disabilities and young women without disabilities.[12] Most would be able to study and work if educational and work environments were designed to be inclusive.

15. Closing these gaps will require both a significant injection of resources and their better targeting to benefit women and girls. Fiscal outlays on social protection and public services should be considered investment, rather than consumption, analogous to investment in physical infrastructure because, by strengthening human capabilities,

[9] Marlies Hesselman, Antenor Hallo de Wolf and Brigit Toebes, *Socio-Economic Rights in Essential Public Service Provision* (Abingdon, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2017).

[10] Gerlinde Verbist, Michael Förster and Maria Vaaluavuo, "The impact of publicly provided services on the distribution of resources: review of new results and methods", OECD Employment and Migration Working Paper No. 130 (Paris, 2012).

[11] UN-Women, *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York, 2018).

[12] Camila Arza, "Pensions and gender equality in Latin America", expert paper prepared for UN-Women expert group meeting, New York, 2018.

it generates significant productivity gains in the medium to long term.[13] In virtually all countries, there is scope for increasing revenue from domestic and external sources, including official development assistance (ODA).[11] Tax policies, international cooperation to combat illicit financial flows and tax evasion, decisions on deficit spending and the management of debt, trade, monetary policy and financial regulation can create an enabling environment for domestic resource mobilization. Gender-responsive budgeting can be used to analyse and transform fiscal policies to direct resources to address inequalities and to monitor the impact of public spending decisions on empowering women and girls.

16. Ensuring the meaningful participation of women and girls in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies is equally indispensable for furthering progress and sustaining it over time. Social accountability mechanisms, such as gender audits, can be used to gather the experiences and grievances of women beneficiaries and users and improve the gender-responsive implementation of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure projects.[14]

Social protection systems for gender equality and women's empowerment

17. Notwithstanding significant progress over the past two decades, gender gaps and biases in social protection systems remain widespread. Where sex-disaggregated data are available, they show women to be overrepresented among those who remain excluded. The global gender gap in access to old-age pensions, for example, stands at 10.6 percentage points.[15] Even where women are relatively well covered, their benefit levels tend to be lower than men's. In the European Union, for example, women's pensions are on average 36.6 percent lower than men's.[16] Gender-specific risks often exacerbate economic insecurity among women and girls over the life course. In 89 countries, for example, extreme poverty in widowhood is significantly higher among women than men.[17] Universal social protection geared towards ensuring an adequate standard of living for all can be achieved only if gender-specific and age-specific risks and vulnerabilities are taken into account.[18]

18. Notwithstanding a significant increase in women's labour force participation, women continue to participate less in the labour market than men, earn lower wages and interrupt their participation more often to care for dependants. They are also overrepresented among informal and non-standard workers in most countries. These factors hamper women's right to social security in systems in which entitlements are tied closely to formal employment.[8] Such schemes are usually referred to as insurance-based or contributory systems. Social insurance systems, however, commonly involve some degree of risk-sharing and redistribution and can be reformed to be made more inclusive.

19. Efforts to extend coverage to informal workers have increased and are essential for supporting transitions to formality. Considering the heterogeneity of informal jobs, however, there is no single solution. In a range of countries, the extension of

[13] James Heintz, "Four points about financing social policies and public investment", expert paper prepared for the UN-Women expert group meeting, New York, 2018.

[14] Tamsin Ayliffe, Rasmus Schjødt and Ghazia Aslam, *Social Accountability in the Delivery of Social Protection: Technical Guidance Note* (London, Development Pathways, 2018).

[15] ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016).

[16] European Commission, *Report on Equality between Women and Men in the European Union 2018* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

[17] Ana Maria Muñoz Boudet and others, "Gender differences in poverty and household composition through the life-cycle: a global perspective", Policy Research Working Paper No. 8360 (Washington, D.C, World Bank, 2018).

[18] Rebecca Holmes and Nicola Jones, *How to Design and Implement Gender-Sensitive Social Protection P ogrammes: A Toolkit*, Overseas Development Institute, 2010.

contributory coverage has shown positive results for workers in informal wage employment, such as domestic workers or workers in informal enterprises, in which employers can be incentivized or mandated to contribute their share. Many workers in informal self-employment, however, are unable to make even low levels of regular contributions and have no recognized employer to make contributions. This is especially true for women in informal self-employment and unpaid family work.[19] In some countries, the State has stepped in to finance the contributions of self-employed workers.

20. Social protection systems have also been redesigned to reduce gender bias. Most countries with data available, for example, have equalized women's and men's retirement age, although 55 countries maintain gender differences.[20] Several countries have revised eligibility rules for minimum pensions in the context of recent pension reforms to make it easier for women to gain access to them by reducing long vesting periods.[12] Fifty-four countries provide care credits as part of their contributory pension schemes to compensate for periods taken out of employment to care for children or other dependants.[21]

21. Parental leave provisions have been reformed to incentivize men to take on more child care.[22] In 2013, at least 79 countries provided some form of leave that fathers can use around the birth of a child.[22] In addition to maternity and paternity leave, 66 mostly middle-income and higher-income countries make parental leaves available to either or both parents, allowing them to take care of an infant or young child over a period of time, usually following the maternity or paternity leave period. While mothers still take the bulk of parental leave, fathers' uptake has increased, in particular when a non-transferable portion of the leave is reserved for them on a "use-or-lose" basis. In most developing countries, however, even maternity leave remains unavailable except for a small group of formal sector employees. Globally, only 41 per cent of mothers with newborns receive a maternity benefit, with regional coverage as low as 33 per cent in Asia and the Pacific and 16 per cent in Africa.[23]

22. Partly in response to these challenges, non-contributory, tax-financed social protection, also referred to as social assistance, has gained traction to expand coverage. Women have benefited from this trend. In several countries in Latin America and Asia, for example, the expansion of social assistance pensions has contributed to reducing gender gaps in coverage and provided women with greater access to personal income in old age.[24] Similarly, social assistance cash transfers for children have spread rapidly. They are usually paid out to mothers and tied to conditionalities, such as taking children to regular health checks or participating in parenting workshops. In 2017, 67 countries had implemented at least one conditional cash transfer.[25]

23. Cash transfers have been associated with progress in poverty reduction, increasing school attendance and health service use and a reduction in child labour. Some studies have also documented a rise in women's and girls' decision-making power relating to marriage, safe sex and fertility, as well as reductions in physical

[19] Rebecca Holmes and Lucy Scott. 2016, "Extending social insurance to informal workers: a gender analysis", Working Paper No. 438 (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2016).

[20] ILO calculations for UN-Women in 2018.

[21] World Bank, *Women Business and the Law: Saving for Old Age* (Washington, D.C., 2018).

[22] ILO, *Maternity and Paternity at Work: Law and Practice across the World* (Geneva, 2014).

[23] In the case of Africa, see ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017–2019*.

[24] Arza, "Pensions and gender equality in Latin America"; Charles Knox-Vydmanov, "Work, family and social protection: old age income security in Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam" (HelpAge International, 2016.

[25] World Bank, "Closing the gap: the state of social safety nets 2017" (April 2017).

(but not emotional) abuse by male partners.[26] Whether the conditionalities attached to these transfers play a role in producing these positive outcomes remains an open and much-debated question.[27] In humanitarian contexts, while aid organizations have begun to incorporate more cash transfers and vouchers, evidence on the impact on gender equality and women's empowerment in these contexts remains scant and inconclusive.[28]

24. While these non-contributory cash transfers can make a positive difference for women and girls, this potential is not fully realized. Benefit levels are often too low and narrowly targeted on the basis of means or proxy means tests that can lead to exclusion errors and contain significant gender bias.[29] There is evidence, for example, that the most deprived women and girls do not always live in the poorest households that are often targeted for assistance.[30] Means-tested interventions can also contribute to stigmatization by singling out specific disadvantaged social groups. Fear of facing discriminatory attitudes may discourage women from gaining access to transfers even when they are entitled to them. The risk of stigmatization is greatest when gender-based discrimination is compounded by inequalities based on class, ethnicity, race or geographic location, among others.[8] Universal schemes are least prone to exclusion errors and stigmatization. Targeting approaches that cover an entire area (geographical targeting) or an entire age cohort (categorical targeting), such as children or older persons, can help to reduce stigmatization and exclusion and are less complex to administer than means-tested programmes.[31]

25. The experience with conditional cash transfers underlines the need for strengthening the links between social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure. While these transfers have increased demand and, in many cases, improved access to public services, such as maternal health care and schooling for girls, their impact on actual learning and health outcomes, such as literacy or maternal nutrition, has been more limited.[26] Poor service quality has been identified as a major bottleneck in this regard. Without adequate investment in services to respond to increased demand, conditionalities may push women and girls to use health and educational facilities that are understaffed and suffer from chronic shortages of medicines or other vital supplies. They may wait long hours to be attended to, losing time that could otherwise be spent on productive activities, leisure or rest. The ability of women to meet programme conditions is also often constrained by their limited access to transportation. Rural women and girls, in particular, may spend hours walking to health and educational facilities to fulfil programme conditionalities in exchange for the monetary transfer.[32] In the light of these constraints, non-compliance

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[26] Francesca Bastagli and others, *Cash Transfers: What Does the Evidence Say? A Rigorous Review of Programme Impact and of the Role of Design and Implementation Features* (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2016).

[27] Stephen Kidd, "To condition or not to condition: what is the evidence?" *Pathways Perspectives on Social Policy in International Development*, No. 20 (March 2016)

[28] UN-Women, "Setting the stage: what we know (and don't know) about the effects of cash-based interventions on gender outcomes in humanitarian settings" (New York, 2018).

[29] Debbie Budlender, "Considerations in using proxy-means tests in Eastern Caribbean States: a policy brief", prepared for the UN-Women Multi-Country Office for the Caribbean and the UNICEF Office the Eastern Caribbean Area, St. Lucia, 2014.

[30] Caitlin Brown, Martin Ravallion and Dominique van de Walle, "Are poor individuals mainly found in poor households? evidence using nutrition data for Africa", Working Paper, No. 24047 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017).

[31] Magdalena Sepúulveda and Carly Nyst, *The Human Rights Approach to Social Protection* (Erweko Oy, 2012).

[32] Tara Cookson, "Social protection and access to public services in the age of conditionality", background paper prepared for the UN-Women expert group meeting, New York, 2018.

with conditionalities calls for additional support rather than punitive measures, such as the suspension or withdrawal of the transfer payment.

Public services for gender equality and women's empowerment

26. Progress has been made in the access of women and girls to public services, in particular health and education. More girls are in school today than ever before and more countries have achieved gender parity in enrolment.[33] Access to essential health services has improved, with global rates of childbirth with a skilled health professional up from 61 per cent in 2000 to 79 per cent in 2016.[11] Significant gaps and inequalities remain, however. Globally, an estimated 77 per cent of women of reproductive age who are married or in-union have their family planning needs met with a modern contraceptive method, leaving nearly 208 million women with unmet needs.[34] Rural women's access to skilled birth attendance is 20 percentage points lower than that of urban women, while poor women's access to modern contraceptives is 19 percentage points lower than that of rich women.[35]

27. Affordability remains a key challenge, in particular when services rely on user fees and co-payments. The detrimental effects of the privatization of services and the application of user fees on public services are well documented for the health sector, in which out-of-pocket payments have been found to have a disproportionately negative impact on the poor. They have also been found to be systematically more adverse for women, compared with men in several countries.[8] To ensure that access to care is not constrained by the ability to pay, many countries are rolling out universal health coverage reforms. To fully live up to their aspiration of universality and equity, these reforms need to be coherent and coordinated across sectors and address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Greater efforts are also needed to ensure that universal health coverage reforms prioritize the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls across the life course.[36]

28. Universal health coverage also requires attention to non-financial barriers that constrain access. Physical distance and travel time are particularly important barriers for women and girls in rural areas where good roads and affordable transport options are often lacking. Legal and institutional barriers can also deter them from seeking care. In some contexts, for example, women and girls are required to show proof of parental or spousal consent for access to sexual and reproductive health-care services. Notwithstanding progress in laws that protect adolescent girls' right to stay in school during pregnancy and motherhood, many struggle to continue their education in the face of weak implementation and the absence of practical support, such as childcare services.[37] Lack of access to information and decision-making power and fear of discrimination, stigma and abuse may also keep women and girls away from public services. For women living with HIV, for example, stigma and discrimination in communities and health-care settings are major barriers to having access to

[33] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *Global Education Monitoring Report 2018: Gender Review—Meeting Our Commitments to Gender Equality in Education* (Paris, 2018).

[34] World Health Organization (WHO), *World Health Statistics 2018: Monitoring Health for the SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2018).

[35] United Nations Population Fund, *State of the World's Population: Worlds Apart—Reproductive Health and Rights in an Age of Inequality* (New York, 2017).

[36] Gita Sen and Veloshnee Govender, "From principle to practice: universal and gender-responsive health services", background paper prepared for the UN-Women expert group meeting, New York, 2018.

[37] UNESCO, *Early and Unintended Pregnancy and the Education Sector: Evidence Review and Recommendations* (Paris, 2017).

anti-retroviral therapy.[38] For indigenous women and girls, in turn, interaction with public services has often been marked by disrespect of their cultural rights, experience of discrimination and institutional violence.

29. The quality of public services also matters for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Gender stereotypes remain ingrained in educational curricula and practices, shaping career choices and employment outcomes. While women outnumber men among university graduates in most countries, for example, they continue to be a minority among science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates, perpetuating their exclusion from better-remunerated employment options.[33] In the health sector, the quality of maternity care has come under increasing scrutiny. While many women continue to lack even basic care, others experience excessive interventions that are not medically justified and often lack voluntary, expressed and informed consent.[39] Throughout countries, women from poor and rural backgrounds, indigenous, Afrodescendent and migrant women, women with disabilities, unmarried women and single mothers are particularly affected by discrimination, abuse and neglect during childbirth.[40] There is also evidence that specific groups of women, including indigenous women, women living with HIV and women with disabilities, are particularly exposed to coercive practices, such as forced sterilization. Removing discrimination in health-care settings and ensuring that women and adolescent girls are aware of their rights and can demand gender-responsive and stigma-free services are fundamental.[41]

30. Central to the transformation of unequal power relations is the quality of specific services. Comprehensive sexuality education, for example, is critical to ensure that young people can lead safe, healthy and productive lives. For young women and girls, in particular, violence and discrimination limit their ability to prevent HIV, sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. Curriculum-based sexuality and HIV education that empowers young people, especially girls, to question gender stereotypes and see themselves and others as equal members in their relationships is substantially more effective in reducing rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections than conventional approaches. Few programmes, however, currently harness this potential and even fewer measure their effects.[42]

31. Beyond education and health care, while there are other types of services that are essential for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, they remain insufficiently available and underfunded. This includes coordinated, available and accessible quality multisectoral services for women and girl survivors of violence[43] and public care services. Universal, quality childcare services, for example, are among the most effective tools for supporting the labour force participation of women with young children.[44] Quality childcare services also

[38] Margaret Johnson and others, "Barriers to access to care reported by women living with HIV across 27 countries", *AIDS Care*, vol. 27, No. 10 (2015).

[39] Michelle Sadler and others, "Moving beyond disrespect and abuse: addressing the structural dimensions of obstetric violence." *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 24, No. 47 (2016).

[40] Myra L. Bertron and others, "Expanding the agenda for addressing mistreatment in maternity care: a mapping review and gender analysis", *Reproductive Health*, vol. 15, No. 143 (2018).

[41] Every Woman Every Child, *The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016–2030): Survive Thrive Transform* (Geneva, 2018).

[42] UNESCO, *Review of the Evidence on Sexuality Education. Report to Inform the Update of the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* (Paris, 2016).

[43] UN-Women and others, *Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence: Core Elements and Quality Guidelines* (New York, 2015).

[44] Sam Harper, Nicole Austin and Arijit Nandi, "Daycare and women's health, social, and economic outcomes in low- and middle-income countries: systematic review and evidence synthesis", Grow Working Paper Series (Ottawa, Institute for the Study of International Development, 2017).

enhance children's cognitive development, educational achievements and health outcomes, with positive effects for overall economic performance. The effects are particularly strong among children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[45] Currently, however, this potential remains unrealized, given that the availability of affordable childcare services remains limited and access is stratified. In a range of developing countries, preschool children in the richest households are almost six times more likely to attend an early childhood education programme than children of the same age group from the poorest households.[11] Even in high-income countries, inequalities in access across income, ethnic or migrant status are prevalent.

32. Public services for care-dependent older persons and/or the chronically ill, known as long-term care, also remain scarce, unaffordable and often of poor quality. In their absence, an estimated 57 million unpaid workers are providing the bulk of long-term care work globally,[46] the large majority of whom are women who have given up their own jobs to care for family members. This is also true in the context of HIV/AIDS, in which women and girls often provide critical, but unpaid, community-based and home-based care (see E/CN.6/2009/2). In the absence of adequate public support, unpaid caregivers often experience a deterioration in their physical and mental health, in particular when the person in their care has complex needs. Given women's greater longevity, they are also particularly affected by inadequate long-term care provision when they themselves become frail.[5]

33. Across sectors, addressing staff shortages and providing workers with decent working conditions is critical for the delivery of gender-responsive quality public services. Globally, women constitute 60 per cent of the education workforce and nearly 70 per cent of the health and social work sector.[47] As with other sectors, women are underrepresented in leadership and decision-making, but overrepresented in front-line service delivery, such as nursing, teaching and midwifery, in which their capacity to deliver quality care is compromised by low wages and poor working conditions, a lack of voice and exposure to violence and harassment. Community health workers, who fill some of the gaps left by underinvestment and professional staff shortages, work under precarious conditions, often without adequate remuneration or social protection. In sub-Saharan Africa, 68 per cent of these workers are women.[47]

Sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and women's empowerment

34. The 2030 Agenda provides a unique opportunity to systematically address the environmental, economic and social dimensions of development through investment in sustainable infrastructure. Such investment can contribute to labour productivity and social inclusion by making water and sanitation accessible, extending sustainable energy to remote rural areas or providing better housing to marginalized city dwellers. It also creates an enabling environment for caregiving, at home and in institutional settings, such as schools and health centres. Better infrastructure is also critical for raising the productivity of women farmers, which, in turn, contributes to enhancing income and food security. Through these multiple synergies, investment in infrastructure can foster sustainable and inclusive growth trajectories.

35. For these benefits to materialize, infrastructure investment needs to integrate gender equality considerations from the outset and be part of long-term development strategies that are matched with sufficient funding. Women do not benefit from

[45] Christopher Ruhm and Jane Waldfogel, "Long-term effects of early childhood care and education", in *Nordic Economic Policy Review: Economics of Education*, No. 1 (Copenhagen, Nordic Council of Ministers, 2012).

[46] ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017–2019: Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2017).

[47] ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).

infrastructure in the same way as men, and they may be exposed to different kinds of risks. While telecommunications infrastructure has experienced a boom over the past decades, growth in Internet uptake and use has been uneven. The gender gap in Internet use not only prevails, but also has grown wider, from 11 per cent in 2013 to 12.2 per cent in 2016, denying large numbers of women the right to information.[48] Globally, 23 per cent of schools were lacking sanitation services in 2016, and a little more than half of them had a basic hygiene service.[49] These deficiencies disproportionately affect adolescent girls who often struggle to manage their menstrual hygiene in school. In 2015, 2.1 billion people lacked access to safely managed drinking water. Women and girls are responsible for water collection in 80 per cent of households without access to water on premises.[11]

36. Closing these gaps will require a significant boost in and better allocation of resources. In many parts of the world, however, public spending on infrastructure has declined and the world as a whole is currently underinvesting.[50] Infrastructure investment can be financed and delivered with varying degrees of State and private sector participation. Without proper regulation and incentives, however, there is no guarantee that investment flows to where its impact on economic, social and environmental sustainability is greatest. While water and sanitation are among the most transformative investment for women and girls, they are much less likely to be financed through private finance or public-private partnerships than other infrastructure investment, such as telecommunications, energy or transport.[51] In particular, in areas in which initial capital investment is significant and the potential for cost recovery is low, private financing is likely to remain limited and public sector financing and leadership indispensable.

37. Gender-responsive investment in urban infrastructure is critical to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe and sustainable. Urban space and transport systems, however, are rarely planned with women's mobility in mind. While sex-disaggregated data is limited, studies show that women rely disproportionately on walking and public transport.[52] Instead of targeting public and intermediate forms of transport that are more used by women, however, investment in transport infrastructure is biased towards roads, highways and bridges that support private motorized forms of transport, which tend to be more accessible to men and are also less sustainable. Public transport systems also often cater to commuting patterns that are more common among men, putting the focus on connecting peripheries to the centre during peak hours. Women, meanwhile, are more likely to engage in multipurpose trips within peripheral neighbourhoods where they combine income-earning with domestic tasks, including dropping children off at school or household provisioning. Isolated or poorly lit transport stops, inaccessible platforms and overcrowded carriages further complicate these tasks and can expose women and girls to harassment and assault.

38. The energy sector is experiencing rapid transformations as climate change is pushing countries to reduce emissions, adopt climate-smart technologies and leapfrog towards renewable energy. Small-scale, off-grid and distributed systems that harness energy from solar, wind, hydro and biomass sources play an increasingly important

[48] International Telecommunications Union, "ICT facts and figures 2016", June 2016.

[49] WHO and UNICEF, *Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: Global Baseline Report 2018* (New York, 2018).

[50] *Trade and Development Report 2018: Power, Platforms and The Free Trade Delusion* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.D.7).

[51] *Trade and Development Report 2015. Making the International Financial Architecture Work for Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.II.D.4).

[52] Tanu Uteng, "Addressing the interlinkages between gender and transport in developing economies", expert paper prepared for the UN-Women expert group meeting, New York, 2018.

role in extending access to underserved areas, in particular in the remote regions of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia where the costs and logistics of grid extension are often prohibitive.[53] Several studies have found that women's participation in governance and technical committees from the design stage is crucial for the success of distributed systems, such as mini grids.[54] Energy planning instruments, however, remain largely gender-blind: of 192 national energy frameworks reviewed in 2017, only one third were considered gender-sensitive.[55]

39. Evidence shows that access to electricity has a positive impact on women's well-being and economic activity. It saves time spent on fuel collection and can enable the use of domestic appliances, thus easing and raising the productivity of women's household work.[56] By allowing for lighting, it extends waking hours, with women often dedicating the additional time to income-generating activities, such as the home-based production of goods for sale. To generate such benefits, electrification projects must go beyond the last mile to ensure that poor households in electrified villages are able to connect to the grid and are not priced out by connection charges or user fees.[57] The level and reliability of electricity supply also matters, as do issues of safety. Running medium-power appliances, such as food processors and water pumps, for example, could significantly reduce some of the onerous and time-consuming work that women do.

40. The renewable energy sector is also a growing source of employment. In 2017, global renewable energy employment increased by 5.3 per cent, to 10.3 million jobs.[58] While reliable sex-disaggregated statistics are scarce, the renewable energy subsector appears to be providing slightly better employment opportunities for women than the energy sector overall. The spread of small-scale and off-grid solutions, in particular, has opened important opportunities for women as researchers, retailers, installers, maintenance workers and entrepreneurs.[53] With estimates of only 20 to 24 per cent of renewable energy jobs being occupied by women,[59] however, greater efforts are needed to address the social and institutional barriers to women's entry into "non-traditional" employment, in particular in medium and large, grid-connected renewable energies. These can include affirmative action policies, mentoring, internships and support for women's school-to-work transition.

41. In line with the 2030 Agenda's principles of leaving no one behind, investment in sustainable infrastructure should follow a "doing good" (generating co-benefits) and "doing no harm" (managing risks) approach.[60] Large-scale infrastructure projects, such as hydropower plants or biofuel production, can lead to displacement,

[53] Energy Sector Management Assistance Program (ESMAP), World Bank, "Integrating gender considerations into energy operations", Energy Sector Management Assistance Program Knowledge Series 014/13 (Washington, D.C., 2013).

[54] Harold Wilhite, "Gender implications of energy use and energy access", Energy and Economic Growth Applied Research Programme State-of-Knowledge Paper Series, 10 December 2017.

[55] International Union for Conservation of Nature and others, "Energizing equality: the importance of integrating gender equality principles in national energy policies and frameworks", September 2017.

[56] Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Balancing the Burden? Desk Review of Women's Time Poverty and Infrastructure in Asia and the Pacific* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines, 2015).

[57] ADB, *Gender Tool Kit: Energy—Going beyond the Meter* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines, 2012).

[58] International Renewable Energy Association, *Renewable Energy and Jobs: Annual Review 2018* (Abu Dhabi, 2018).

[59] Paloma Marcos and others, "Gender and renewable energy: wind, solar, geothermal and hydroelectric energy", November 2014.

[60] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Heinrich Böll Foundation, *The Other Infrastructure Gap: Sustainability, Human Rights and Environmental Perspectives. Executive Summary*, (Geneva and Berlin, 2018).

land dispossession and food insecurity, with detrimental consequences for women and girls.[61] It is therefore paramount to strengthen information disclosure, consultation, participation and accountability mechanisms to effectively assess and manage the risks, including gender-differentiated risks, of infrastructure projects.[60] The environmental, gender and human rights impact of such investment should be systematically assessed, and affected individuals, communities and organizations must have a voice in such processes.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

42. **Well-designed and integrated social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure can advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and sustainable development by strengthening human capabilities, social cohesion and resilience to shocks. To maximize the productive potential of social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure, it is imperative that they work in tandem with macroeconomic policies that enhance job creation and livelihoods. Resources allocated to these areas should therefore be seen as an investment with short-term and long-term benefits that help societies and economies to achieve a more prosperous, peaceful and sustainable future and significantly accelerate the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To play this role, they must be designed to prevent and eliminate discrimination and violence, strengthen the capabilities of women and girls, facilitate women's access to decent work and raise the productivity of both their paid and unpaid labour, including by making full use of technology. A human rights-based and gender-responsive approach is fundamental to reap these benefits.**

43. **To strengthen social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure in order to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the Commission may wish to urge governments and other stakeholders to take the action set out below.**

Strengthen the normative, legal and institutional environment

(a) **Take action to fully implement existing commitments and obligations with respect to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and the full and equal enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms so as to improve their lives, livelihoods and well-being;**

(b) **Enshrine the right to social protection in national legal frameworks, supported by national strategies and action plans with gender equality and women's empowerment at their core;**

(c) **Adopt a human rights-based and gender-responsive approach to the design, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social protection, public service and sustainable infrastructure, and ensure their availability, accessibility, adequacy, acceptability and quality;**

(d) **Create and strengthen coordination across sectors and levels of government and with private for-profit and not-for-profit providers for the integrated implementation of gender-responsive social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure;**

[61] United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Gender and Environment Outlook 2016* (Nairobi, 2016).

(e) Strengthen the capacity of and funding for national gender equality mechanisms to support and monitor the mainstreaming of gender perspectives into the design and delivery of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure;

(f) Ensure that women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination enjoy equal access to social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities;

(g) Invest in social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure to support the productivity and economic viability of women's work in the informal economy;

(h) Ensure that women have equal access to decent work in public services and infrastructure and take measures to reduce gender pay gaps, strengthen collective bargaining and enable women's career advancement;

Address gender gaps and biases in social protection

(i) Conduct context-specific assessments of gender-differentiated risks across the life course and their intersection with other forms of discrimination to inform the design and implementation of social protection schemes;

(j) Work towards universal and gender-responsive social protection systems, including floors, that ensure the income security of women across their life course;

(k) Extend comprehensive social protection systems to all women, especially to women in informal employment, and progressively improve the adequacy of benefits;

(l) Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work by ensuring access to social protection for unpaid caregivers, including coverage for health care and pensions;

(m) Guarantee access to maternity protection in accordance with the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) of the International Labour Organization for all workers and promote the equal sharing of responsibilities by expanding parental leave that incentivizes fathers' participation in child-rearing;

(n) Prevent the exclusion and stigmatization of women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination by avoiding narrow means-tested targeting and opting for broad coverage of benefits;

(o) Assess the need for conditionalities and ensure that, where they exist, non-compliance does not lead to punitive measures that exclude already marginalized women and girls;

Transform public services for gender equality and women's empowerment

(p) Scale up investment to increase the availability of public care services and coordinated, multisectoral services for women and girls who are survivors of violence;

(q) Identify and remove financial and non-financial barriers that constrain women's and girls' access to public services, such as physical distance and transportation, lack of information and decision-making power and stigma and discrimination;

(r) Ensure that public services are of adequate quality, gender-responsive, age-sensitive and disability-sensitive, culturally relevant and physically accessible for older women and women with disabilities, and free from violence, stigma and sexual harassment;

(s) Ensure the affordability of health-care services through universal health coverage that includes universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights across the life course;

(t) Use gender-responsive educational curricula to improve the quality of education services, eliminate gender stereotypes and transform unequal power relations;

(u) Improve employment standards of women workers in front-line health, education and care services and strengthen recognition and protection for the most vulnerable groups, such as community health workers;

Make infrastructure investment work for women and girls

(v) Prioritize investment in environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient infrastructure, including in technology and digital telecommunications, that promotes women's health, well-being, livelihoods and productivity and generates employment for women in non-traditional sectors;

(w) Conduct systematic and transparent assessments of the environmental, human rights and gender impact of infrastructure projects with the full participation of women and girls in affected communities;

(x) Guarantee the availability of clean water and safe sanitation for women and girls, including for menstrual hygiene management, in homes, schools, health clinics, transportation hubs, refugee camps, government offices, work sites and other public places;

(y) Ensure household-level access to adequate levels of electricity through grid and off-grid solutions that support women's multiple roles and their specific livelihood needs;

(z) Ensure that the implementation of community energy systems, such as mini-grids, provides targeted support and incentives for women's participation and leadership as users and producers;

(aa) Ensure that urban transport policies and planning are accessible and gender-responsive, consider women's multiple roles as workers and caregivers, protect their safety and promote their mobility and economic empowerment;

Mobilize resources, strengthen accountability and improve evidence

(bb) Refrain from cutbacks in social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure that benefit women and girls, in the context of austerity measures;

(cc) Increase investment in universal and gender-responsive social protection, quality public services and sustainable infrastructure through domestic resource mobilization, including progressive and gender-responsive tax measures and budgeting;

(dd) Strengthen international cooperation, meet commitments to ODA and ensure that ODA investment in social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure is directed to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls;

(ee) **Evaluate the costs and benefits of private sector participation in social protection systems, public service delivery and infrastructure development and hold private providers accountable for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls;**

(ff) **Promote the full and equal participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in policy dialogues and decision-making relating to social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure;**

(gg) **Create and strengthen gender-responsive accountability mechanisms, such as gender audits, and include beneficiaries and users in the evaluation of social protection, public services and infrastructure projects;**

(hh) **Improve the collection and use of data, disaggregated by sex, age, income and location, on access to and the adequacy of social protection benefits, including child allowances, pensions and disability and unemployment benefits;**

(ii) **Strengthen the collection of data, disaggregated by sex, age, income and location, on time use and on violence against women and girls, and use these data to inform social protection, public services and infrastructure policies;**

(jj) **Complement quantitative impact evaluations with qualitative studies of the implementation of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure to make visible the adverse consequences for women and girls.**

44. **The Commission may wish to call upon the United Nations system and other international organizations, including international financial institutions, to work collaboratively to support Member States in implementing, measuring and monitoring the foregoing recommendations at all levels.**